

Ladies Elect

Address by Baroness Patricia Hollis to the AGM of the Women's Local Government Society
Sheffield Town Hall, Saturday 10 March 2007

100 years ago, almost to the month, John Burns, President of the Board of Trade, sent to the Lords a 2 clause bill on local government, allowing women ratepayers to be elected to the glittering prizes, the great city and county councils. From 1870, women had already sat on more modest local authorities, such as school, poor law boards and rural councils.

Their Lordships were somewhat started as bills seldom started in the Lords, but they manfully debated it, pointing out that "*women were too hysterical... guided by feeling and not cold reason*" (the learned Earl of Halsbury, 12 June 1907, Hansard col 1355); alternatively that they were best suited for bland lives of blamelessness and barley water and not the rowdiness of politics, but above all, and against the background of Mrs Pankhurst's militancy, that to be elected onto the great city councils would inevitably and disastrously lead to women's suffrage.

But by mid August and at 1.30 am at night John Burns pushed through its second reading in the Commons and it became law by the end of August 1907.

The background is interesting. In 1900 Norfolk had more women holding elected office than in 1980. For as towns grew and local government developed during the 19th century, women followed their conventional charitable work, for women and children, the sick and the elderly, into the town hall - "administrative philanthropy" they called it, "municipal housekeeping".

Their work was demanding, dirty, even dangerous. They went into filthy workhouse infirmaries, where the epileptic, the dying child, the "imbeciles" as they were known, the lying-in mother, the senile dementia elderly, and the highly infectious, shared wards, beds, stained sheets and chamber pots - which also doubled up as wash basins. As Cllr Edith Sutton of Reading noted sourly, married men wouldn't do this work because their wives feared they might bring infection home.

Rosamund Davenport Hill inspected industrial truant schools to find boys flogged, chained, or doused with cold water and then made to stand outdoors in mid winter. She sacked the senior teachers, paid the boys' medical bills, fed them sausages and mash, and took them to the zoo.

It was said of Florence Melly who served on the Liverpool School Board that she worked harder and for longer hours than any paid official; and as she bicycled to visit every elementary school in Liverpool in the worst of weathers, few realised she was a diabetic in a pre-insulin age struggling always to keep her condition under control. For many, their local authority work broke their health.

But they would not be deterred, The women brought tea, red cushions and canaries into bleak workhouses to comfort the elderly, devised sheltered housing, special schools for disabled children and foster care for orphan children.

Chamberlain's vision for Birmingham was a local government that managed utilities, trams and construction - Town Hall Inc. Women added another dimension, social services, for those who were marginal - the prostitute with syphilis, the alcoholic tramp, the foul-smelling beggar, the deformed child - and reclaimed them into citizenship.

They were often bitterly resented and cold shouldered. It took courage of a high order to become a

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suffragette and break the law; but it took courage also of a high order to stand for election and then work week in and week out as the solitary woman member, enduring the gibes, crude jokes and hostility of male colleagues.

But sustained by their faith, their feminism and their families, they hung on in. As Liverpool's Eleanor Rathbone put it: *"she represented the men of her ward but also the women of the city"*. Mabel Clarkson ran her campaign in Norwich on the slogan, *"the best wealth of a city is in the health of its citizens"*, and graphically described families with half a dozen children living in 2 or 3 damp, insanitary little rooms, crouched in the shadow of Norwich cathedral - families who were then criticised by the moral majority for their slovenly ways.

Margaret Ashton of Manchester studied drainage systems; others demanded street lighting, public WCs to end fouling, and policing of brothels and common lodging houses to reclaim the streets for women.

They built baths and wash-houses, because as Hannah Mitchell knew, it was impossible to keep a large family and voluminous clothes clean in an upper floor tenement without running water. Though she built them, the men insisted on opening them. Wouldn't we know it.

Susan Lawrence on the London County Council (LCC) noted that women cleaners were abused by male caretakers; trying to win for them what she called a moral rather than a market wage took her on her journey from the Tory Party to the Labour Party of George Lansbury, and a government post in the first Labour government of 1924.

Meanwhile Nettie Adler tried to check child labour, which saw half a million twelve year olds working long hours before and after the school day.

In particular women campaigned to reduce infant mortality - which in 1899 was 160 per thousand, as bad as any famine-ridden sub-Saharan African country today. They tried to get trained midwives, clean milk and water, as well as family allowances for mothers to pay for it.

Increasingly women were attracted by the vision of Ruskin and William Morris, and sought to beautify their cities with parks and gardens, street trees and water fountains. Mrs Lees of Oldham, then known as the ugliest town in Britain, built garden suburbs to show what could be done. She understood the hunger for beauty among working class women, and the need to have pride in your place. These women made a real difference.

Women believe that such local government work would win them the vote. However, Liberals feared that propertied women would vote Tory; Tories, that female suffrage would challenge male authority. Gladstone added that if married women got the vote, husbands would either have two votes or engage in marital dispute; yet if votes were confined to spinsters and widows, they would be rewarding those without a husband, the failures of their sex. So clearly you couldn't enfranchise any women. The Lords thought this argument very fetching.

Indeed far from local government being a stepping stone to the vote, it blocked it. Men now decided that there were two spheres of politics: the domestic - education, poor law, hospital work, which women could and should do; and imperial - war, commerce, empire, finance, which women clearly could not. Precisely because women had found their appropriate service in local government, they were not needed, or wanted, at Westminster. As the Archbishop of Canterbury said, trying, but perhaps failing, to be helpful in the 1907 debate, it was women's service that was needed, not

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women's rights.

Not until 1918 did propertied and older women get the vote, and then not because of their local government or their war work, not because of suffragette demands, but because the war got everybody off the hook of militancy; and above all because, for the Lib-Labs, a limited propertied women's suffrage would be safely swamped by the universal suffrage of left-leaning men returning from the Front.

For the last 25 years or so, around 30% of councillors have been women - at a time when only 5-10% of MPs have been - until Labour pushed through women-only shortlists. We hope that the Conservatives' Women2Win and the Liberals' affirmative action will prove equally successful.

Why have women done so much better in local government? It's part-time, local, makes sense of the narrative of women's lives as parents, workers, neighbours, carers, tenants, volunteers; it builds on their own experience and expertise; it is accessible, and given the number of seats it is not particularly competitive. Unlike Westminster, with its long hours, long absences, which fragment women's lives.

If more women are to enter politics, then surely we should take power to them, into the locality, rather than just seek to bring women to where power currently resides, Westminster, though we need that too. Devolving more power to local government would both strengthen local government and strengthen women's participation in politics.

This could transform services, choice, diversity, accountability. It would redistribute power from the centre to the localities, from London to the regions, from south to north, east and west, from larger to smaller, from whites to some blacks and to rather more women. A good agenda, if like Nye Bevan said, the purpose of power is to give it away.

That bill 100 years ago was pressed onto John Burns by the Women's Local Government Society, a stoutly feminist group of women progressives founded in the 1880s to encourage and support women into local government, with literature, legal advice and lobbying. We are re-founding that WLGS in Sheffield today - to strengthen women's presence in, and contribution to, local government.

Thursday was international women's day. Relaunching the WLGS is such a good way to celebrate Women's Day. And let's work to bring more and more women into local government. They are just as sorely needed as a hundred years ago.

Patricia Hollis
March 2007